

# CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

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## 1.1 PROJECT OVERVIEW

The Rio Hondo Watershed Management Plan (RHWMP) provides an organizing framework for cities, public agencies, private groups, community members, and other stakeholders working together to develop a healthy watershed within the densely developed urban environment of the San Gabriel River Valley. The RHWMP contains an overview of existing conditions within the watershed, discusses how these conditions should shape the selection and design of watershed improvement strategies, and presents recommended projects, programs and other opportunities including those proposed by community stakeholders.



## 1.2 PURPOSE OF RIO HONDO WATERSHED MANAGEMENT PLAN

The RHWMP was made possible by a \$200,000 grant to the San Gabriel Valley Council of Governments (SGVCOG) from the State Water Resource Control Board's Proposition 13 grant program. This watershed protection program encourages the development of comprehensive, collaborative strategies for management and enhancement of environmental resources throughout a watershed, rather than focus solely on single-purpose individual projects or specific site solutions to water quality problems that may have been customary in the past. The watershed management approach is driven by a wider perspective where, sub-sub watershed solutions at the local level work together with larger inter-community projects as part of an overall plan; an integrated region-wide solution designed to effectively address the shared, interrelated problems and opportunities that are present in the watershed.

In conformance to these planning principles, the RHWMP is a multi-objective plan designed to “restore” the beneficial properties of the Rio Hondo Watershed by exploring the potential to integrate and balance opportunities in water quality, water conservation and supply, flood protection, recreation, open space, habitat preservation, public health and safety, and the stewardship of the watershed (see insert on next page— *Watershed Restoration Terminology*). This integrative, multi-objective approach to watershed planning operates on the premise that more can be accomplished by jointly pursuing these many important community interests rather than one at the expense of the others.

A multi-objective approach requires that stakeholders have a forum in which to come together to present and solve shared issues, from which they can then identify high priority projects for both regional and local benefit. Although this was the first time that Rio Hondo stakeholders had come together on a watershed-wide basis to collectively address shared issues and concerns, it will not be the last. One of the other primary purposes of the RHMP was to develop a watershed constituency, individuals and organizations that will continue to work together on behalf of the entire watershed. In addition, by demonstrating a shared commitment and partnership among the many communities within the watershed, the RHMP will also help secure future funding and other resources needed to implement projects, as well as other short and long-range actions for watershed restoration.

Also, the RHWMP does not exist in isolation from other nearby watershed planning efforts. The partnerships necessarily extend beyond the geographic boundaries of the

Rio Hondo watershed to other rivers and watershed, such as the Los Angeles River of which it is a tributary, and the San Gabriel River to which it is also integrally linked. For these reasons, efforts to restore the Rio Hondo Watershed will be part of an even larger coordinated effort including other sub-watershed management plans and overall plans for the Los Angeles and San Gabriel Rivers.

Finally, the RHWMP is an initial watershed management plan that is meant to serve as a foundation for future planning efforts throughout the watershed. Watershed planning is necessarily an iterative process in which each subsequent plan builds upon the results of the preceding planning and implementation process. However, there are no limits to the possibilities of what can be achieved if there is a commitment and a desire to improve the watershed.

## Watershed “Restoration” Terminology

Since “restore” and other similar terminology will be used throughout the Plan, it is presented here to clarify valuable distinctions that should be kept in mind when assessing this watershed plan and the individual projects contained within it. This terminology is largely derived from the experience of wetlands projects but is applicable to the remedial efforts undertaken to improve the functioning of all ecological systems, including watersheds:

**Restoration** – the return of a watershed (or other ecological system) from a disturbed or altered condition by human activity to a previously existing condition. (1)

**Creation** – the construction of an ecological system, such as a wetland or lake, in an area that was not a wetland or lake in the recent past (within the last 100-200 years) and that is isolated from existing similar natural systems. (2)

**Enhancement** – improving the structure or function(s) of an already existing ecological system, such as a watershed. (3)

**Preservation** – the protection of an existing and well-functioning ecological system; such as a watershed, wetland, etc; from prospective future threats. Preservation does not involve alteration of the site. (1)

**Mitigation** – the creation, restoration, enhancement, or preservation of an ecological system designed to offset permitted losses to the natural ecological functioning of another site. (1)

Although the term “restore” is frequently used to describe all activities intended to improve watershed functioning, when the term is used more precisely it would apply to only a small subset of all watershed projects. As the definition for “restoration” makes clear, it will not be possible or desirable to return the Rio Hondo Watershed to its pre-human conditions. Instead, the overall effort stemming from this watershed plan can be characterized as a watershed “enhancement” program. In some instances, however, individual projects within this watershed plan may be characterized as “creation,” “mitigation”, or “restoration” efforts depending upon the specific opportunities present at those sites and their intended goals.

The above definitions are based upon wetlands restoration terminology found in the following sources:

- (1) Compensating for Wetland Losses Under the Clean Water Act, National Academy of Sciences, 2001.
- (2) Gwin, S. E., M.E. Kentula, and P.W. Shaffer. 1999. Evaluating the Effects of Wetland Regulation through Hydrogeomorphic Classification and Landscape Profiles. Wetlands
- (3) Middleton, B. 1999. Wetland restoration, flood pulsing, and disturbance dynamics. John Wiley & Sons, Inc., New York.





## 1.3 WHY ORGANIZE AROUND WATERSHEDS?

Environmental resources typically do not fall within traditional political boundaries. Instead water, wildlife and other natural resources respond to more fundamental pre-existing, contours defining the natural environment. This reality requires separate political jurisdictions establish collaborative relationships to deal with environmental problems that cross over the lines of their administrative territories. This interconnectivity also requires cities to recognize that local actions within the boundaries of their jurisdictions can have consequences in the larger environment.

The best example interconnectivity in the natural world is in a watershed, an area of land (or drainage basin) from which all surface water drains downhill to a shared destination such as a river, pond, lake or stream. Landforms, such as mountain ranges, hills, ridgelines and other high grounds, as well as storm drains and other conveyance structures, direct water one way or another, forming the boundary of the watershed. Watersheds can be tiny or immense and are often composed of smaller watersheds.

Although a watershed is natural system of flowing water, human activities within a watershed will often impact and modify these natural conditions. Dams and flood control structures have been seen as necessary to protect communities, but they have altered the natural courses of rivers and streams. Urban development covers land areas with buildings, pavement and other impermeable surfaces, eliminating natural percolation into the groundwater, while also limiting opportunities to improve water quality. Rather than being slowly absorbed into the soil, water now runs off the land in larger amounts and at higher velocities, testing the limits of flood control systems and limiting the ability of the former natural system to absorb pollutants and clean the water.

The interconnectivity of a watershed makes it difficult for any single city or administrative unit acting alone to effectively address water quality, water supply, or other natural resource problems that may arise from human activities. Watershed management is a response to this reality. That encourages all those who live and work within a watershed to think in terms of the watershed when considering the potential impacts of their actions. The watershed management approach can encourage individual cities to look within their own jurisdictions for opportunities to create a healthy watershed, and when the opportunities arise to also pursue broader watershed-wide collaborations with other cities. Whether acting at the local, level or acting in concert with others, watershed management represents a rational approach to develop solutions that reflect the natural interdependencies within the watershed.



1941 Aerial Photo of Rio Hondo Watershed from Garvey Bridge looking Northeast.

## 1.4 A SNAPSHOT OF THE RIO HONDO WATERSHED

The Rio Hondo (“Deep River”) River, along with its headwaters in the Angeles National Forest, and its tributaries in the San Gabriel Valley form a 142 square mile sub-watershed of the much larger 834 square mile Los Angeles River Watershed. The Rio Hondo River also links the double watersheds of the Los Angeles and San Gabriel Rivers. Although it is now a major tributary of the Los Angeles River, its channel once formed the main bed of the San Gabriel River. The six major tributaries of the Rio Hondo are the Alhambra, Rubio, Eaton, Arcadia, Santa Anita, and Sawpit Washes (*See Map 1-1 Main Subwatersheds*)

The major portion of the Rio Hondo Watershed is located within the heart of the San Gabriel Valley. The geographic reach of the watershed also extends further south beyond the San Gabriel Valley to the Rio Hondo’s confluence with the Los Angeles River, located within the City of South Gate, several miles southeast of downtown Los Angeles. Outside of its headwaters in the Angeles National Forest, the watershed is a densely developed area that encompasses 21 cities, and unincorporated portions of Los Angeles County. The watershed includes all or portions of the foothill cities of Pasadena, Sierra Madre, Arcadia, Monrovia, Bradbury, and Duarte. The central belt of the watershed includes the cities of South Pasadena, Alhambra, Monterey Park, San Marino, San Gabriel, Temple City, Rosemead, El Monte, South El Monte and Irwindale. Further south where the watershed narrows, it includes the cities of Montebello, Pico Rivera, Commerce, Bell Gardens, Downey and South Gate (*see Map 1-2 Cities of Rio Hondo Watershed*).

The Rio Hondo Watershed can also be viewed in terms of its six main subwatersheds created by the tributaries identified above. Five of these subwatersheds encompass most of the central and upper portions of the Rio Hondo Watershed. Most of these subwatersheds have headwaters in the undeveloped mountains of the Angeles National Forest, but enter highly urbanized areas just below the foothills. The sixth “watershed” includes all those areas that drain directly into the Rio Hondo, primarily areas in the lower portions of the overall watershed and along its eastern border with the San Gabriel River watershed.

- ***Alhambra Wash***, including its tributary San Pasqual Wash, is a highly urbanized watershed extending from its headwaters in northwestern Pasadena

just above the 210 Freeway southeast to its confluence with the Rio Hondo at Whittier Narrows in Rosemead.

- ***Rubio Wash*** is primarily an urbanized subwatershed except for its headwaters in the foothills of the San Gabriel Mountains just above Altadena. These headwaters are divided among several tributaries including Las Flores Canyon and Rubio Canyon. Its confluence with the Rio Hondo is in South El Monte just above Whittier Narrows.
- ***Eaton Wash*** is a long linear subwatershed extending from its headwaters deep in the San Gabriel Mountains above eastern Pasadena and then south through unincorporated portions of Los Angeles County, Temple City to its confluence with the Rio Hondo near the border of El Monte and South El Monte. Its headwaters form an extensive network of tributaries including Pasadena Glen and Harvard Branch, in addition to Eaton Wash.
- ***Arcadia Wash*** is primarily an urban subwatershed. Its headwaters do extend into the foothills of the San Gabriel Mountains above Sierra Madre, but these lie just below the more extensive headwaters of both Eaton Wash and Santa Anita Wash. In the City of Arcadia, the main trunk of Arcadia Wash divides into two tributaries, Arcadia Wash and the East Branch of Arcadia Wash.
- ***Santa Anita Wash*** is similar to Eaton Wash in having a very extensive network of headwater tributaries in the undeveloped portions of the San Gabriel Mountains lying above Sierra Madre, Arcadia, and Monrovia. These include Sierra Madre Wash, Little Santa Anita Canyon, Santa Anita Canyon, and many other additional smaller tributaries. The smaller urbanized portion of the subwatershed extends south to its confluence with the Rio Hondo at Peck Park in Arcadia.
- ***Sawpit Wash*** features many headwater tributaries in the undeveloped portions of the San Gabriel Mountains and foothills above Monrovia and Bradbury, including Sawpit Canyon and Sycamore Canyon. From there it flows south to its confluence which forms the beginning of the main channel of Rio Hondo at Peck Park.

Major flood control structures within the Rio Hondo Watershed include the Whittier Narrows Dam, Eaton Wash Dam, and Santa Anita Dam

The Rio Hondo watershed is a key resource for groundwater recharge activities within Los Angeles County, playing a major role in the replenishment of potable groundwater supplies. . Several groundwater recharge basins are operated throughout the Rio Hondo Watershed. This includes the Rio Hondo Coastal Basin Spreading Basins (Rio Hondo Spreading Grounds) located south of the Whittier Narrows, the largest and most productive spreading grounds in Los Angeles County, as well as

other groundwater recharge basins at Eaton Canyon, Big Santa Anita, and Peck Road Water Conservation Park.. The County of Los Angeles Department of Public Works (LACDPW) has engineered channels to divert water from the San Gabriel River to the Rio Hondo River, enabling it to take full advantage of these productive resources.

These many recharge basins were developed to help replenish groundwater supplies. These facilities help compensate for the loss of natural percolation throughout the watershed due to the pervasive spread of impermeable surfaces such as buildings, parking lots and other forms of urban sprawl.. These basins were constructed per the Los Angeles County Flood Control Act and are legally mandated.

As a result of these groundwater recharge activities in the unlined reaches of the watershed, the amount of water flow in the Rio Hondo that reaches the Los Angeles River is minimal during the dry season. Flow from the Rio Hondo is only expected to reach the Los Angeles River during rain events when the spreading facilities are bypassed or when flows exceed recharge capacities.



*Bosque del Rio Hondo stream*

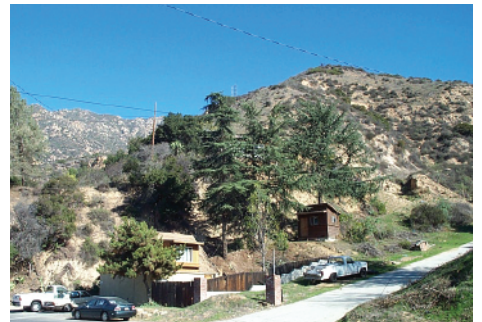
## Images of the Rio Hondo



a.



b.



c.

- a. Eaton Wash Overlook
- b. Alhambra Wash at Rio Hondo Confluence
- c. Rubio Canyon Homes

## Channelized sections of the Rio Hondo



a.



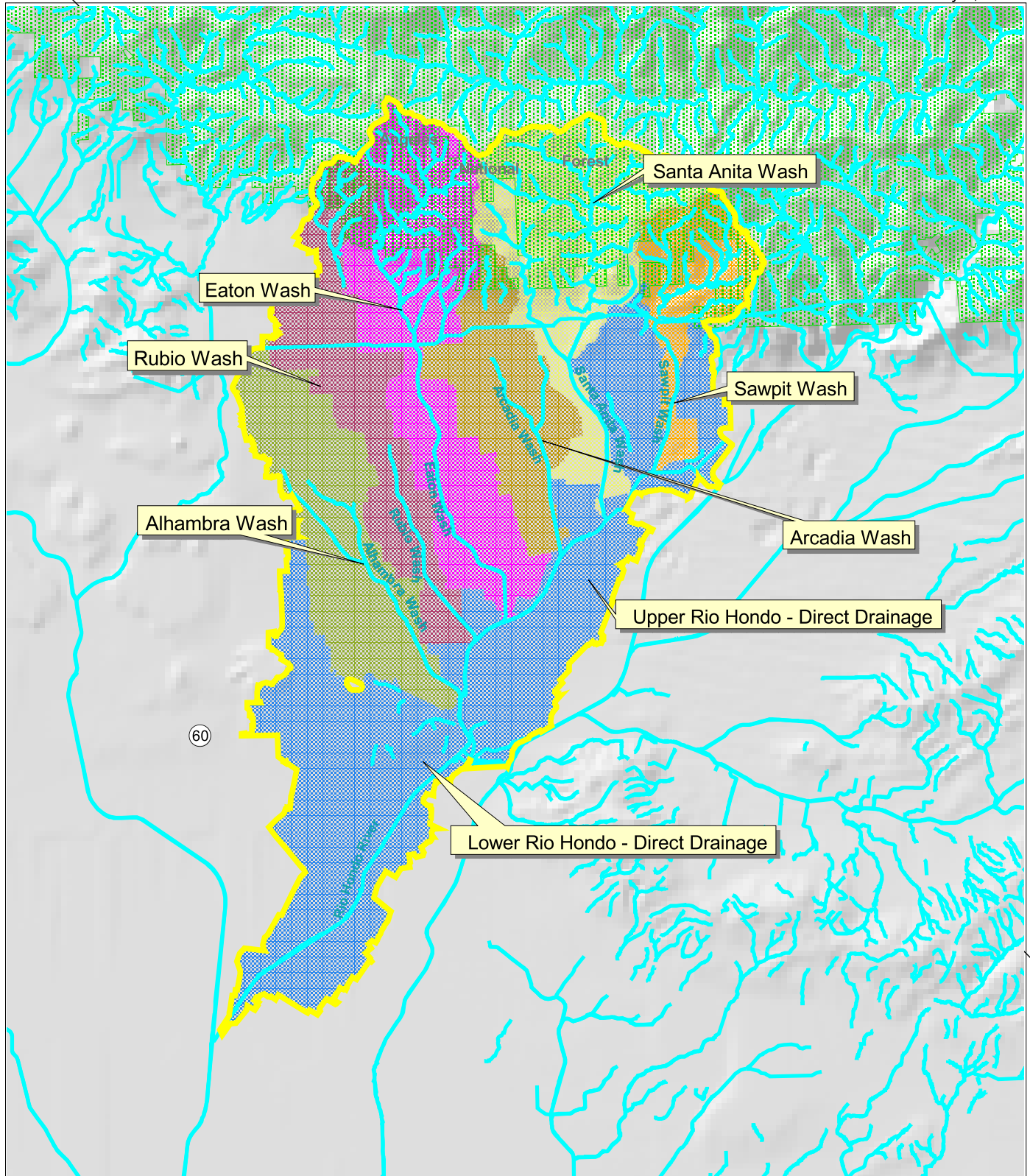
b.

a. Rio Hondo Downstream at Arcadia Wash  
b. Rio Hondo at Slauson looking north



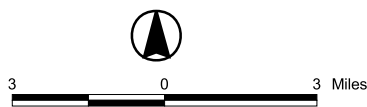
# Main Subwatersheds

July 9, 2004



- Rio Hondo River Watershed
- Rivers, channels and streams.shp
- Angels National Forest
- Rio Hondo Direct Drain
- Alhambra Wash Watershed
- Rubio Wash Watershed
- Eaton Wash Watershed
- Arcadia Wash Watershed
- Santa Anita Wash Watershed
- Sawpit Wash Watershed

Map created by the Rivers and Mountains Conservancy



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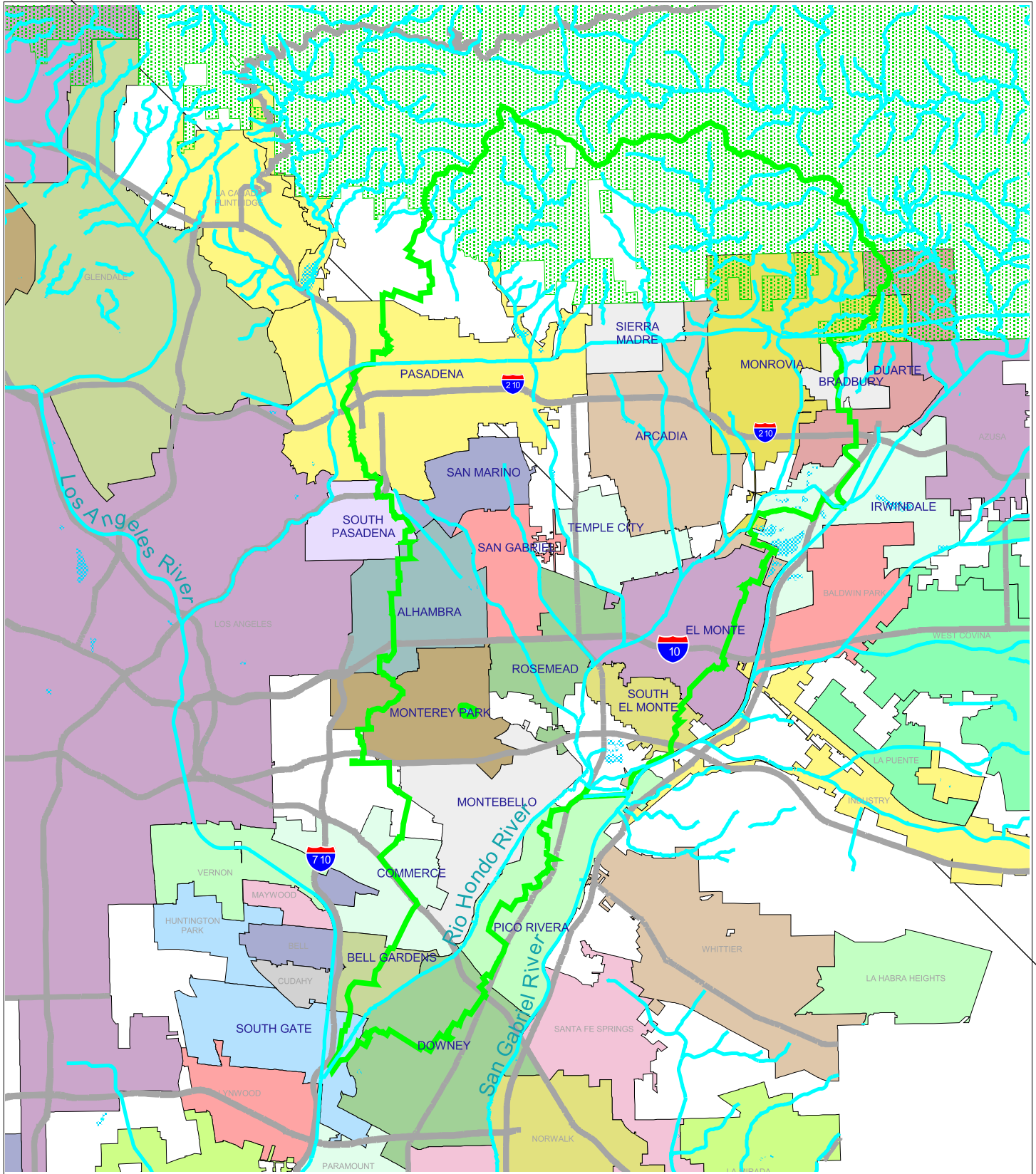
San Gabriel Valley  
Council of Governments



State of California - The Resources Agency  
San Gabriel & Lower Los Angeles  
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Rio Hondo Hydrology



# San Gabriel & Lower Los Angeles Rivers & Mountains Conservancy



## Rio Hondo River Watershed City Boundaries

- Los Angeles - Channels, Rivers, Streams
- Rio Hondo River Watershed
- Los Angeles - Freeways and Highways
- Los Angeles National Forest
- Los Angeles - Lakes and Reservoirs



3 0 3 Miles

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(626) 458-4315 ; Fax 458-7353  
[www.rmc.ca.gov](http://www.rmc.ca.gov)



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## 1.5 REGULATORY CONTEXT FOR RIO HONDO WATERSHED MANAGEMENT PLAN

The Rio Hondo Watershed Management Plan is part of a much larger shift now taking place nationwide in how communities approach water quality improvement. Since 1972 when the U.S. Congress passed the Clean Water Act (CWA), most efforts at improving water quality focused on regulating pollutant discharges from sewers, factory pipes, construction sites, and other end-of-pipe “point sources.” (See insert for overview of water quality regulatory tools) During this period, the National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) program served as the primary regulatory framework for pollutant discharges. Under this program significant progress was made in cleaning up rivers, streams, lakes, and other water bodies, but it has not achieved all the required water quality standards. Most point sources are now highly regulated. During the 1990’s it became increasingly clear that it would not be possible to generate further significant improvements in water quality by continuing an exclusive focus on point sources.

In recent years another approach for water quality improvement has been receiving increased attention. It focuses on all water pollution sources and not just those that can be easily traced to specific, discrete sources. Instead this watershed-based approach also encompasses polluted water runoff emanating from countless, diverse non-point sources within a watershed that are very hard to track much less to control by traditional means. Although this approach to target pollution reduction from all sources in a watershed, known as Total Maximum Daily Loads (or TMDLs) was an original element of the Clean Water Act, it did not receive much attention during the first few decades in which the CWA was in effect. The extent to which TMDLs are required varies depending upon the degree of progress still needed to achieve local water quality standards.

As part of their comprehensive water quality improvement programs, states are required to establish specific quality standards for their lakes, rivers, streams and other water bodies depending on the “beneficial uses” of that water body. In California there are up to 24 potential beneficial uses that may be designated, including groundwater recharge, municipal and domestic water supply, water contact recreation, and multiple habitat-related uses. Depending upon the actual or potential beneficial uses that exist for a water body, these will determine the water quality standards that are applied to that water body.

If an assessment of the water body determines that it is not achieving water quality standards under traditional point source controls, it is listed as an impaired water body under Section 303(d) of the Clean Water Act. The TMDL establishes a pollutant watershed budget, defining the maximum amount of pollutants that can be received by the water body and still meet its water quality objectives. If the sum of allowable pollutants from both point and non-point sources exceeds this maximum amount, then a TMDL implementation (or clean-up) plan is required.

The effort to address non-point source pollution via TMDLs encourages a watershed-wide approach involving multiple stakeholders implementing cost-effective strategies that will assist cities with contributing to watershed sustainability while maintaining regulatory requirements. Since watershed management acknowledges the environmental impacts of a range of activities, it requires a broad, holistic perspective that will integrate goals and strategies beyond just those directly tied to improving water quality. These include programs designed to restore and enhance habitat, ensure water supply reliability, maintain flood protection, create open space, expand recreational resources, and public stewardship of the watershed as well as others depending upon the nature and characteristics of the watershed.

In the Basin Plan developed by the Los Angeles Regional Water Quality Control Board (RWQCB), several water bodies within the Rio Hondo Watershed are listed as impaired under Section 303(d) of the Clean Water Act. Many of the impairments that have been identified within water bodies located within the Rio Hondo watershed include among others trash, copper, lead, zinc, ammonia, pH, and coliform bacteria. Storm water runoff is known to be a major source of the pollution within the watershed. Although several water bodies located within the Rio Hondo watershed are impaired, much of its water is recharged directly into the groundwater, where it becomes a major source of the local water supply. Given these and other sensitive beneficial uses, the designated water quality standards for the Rio Hondo are high. Many local cities and water districts are very concerned about the stringency of the standards proposed for addressing pollution attributed to urban runoff and the costs associated with achieving these regulatory standards.

Many stakeholders of the Rio Hondo Watershed want to do all that is reasonably possible to achieve improved water quality, and still address other important community goals. For this reason local cities and other Rio Hondo stakeholders have actively joined together in a process to develop a consensus-based watershed management plan that can achieve measurable environmental improvements for the benefit of the entire region. Since the Rio Hondo Watershed is a sub-watershed of the larger Los Angeles River Watershed, then as a result of this cooperative effort all water quality improvements that are achieved within the Rio Hondo Watershed will also have a benefit to downstream Los Angeles River impairments.

## Water Quality Regulations

***Clean Water Act (CWA)*** is the principal federal law that governs pollution in the nation's lakes, rivers, and coastal waters. Originally enacted in 1972 as a series of amendments to the Federal Water Pollution Control Act of 1948 the Act was last amended in 1987. The overriding purpose of the CWA is to “restore and maintain the chemical, physical and biological integrity of the nation's waters.” The statute employs a variety of regulatory and nonregulatory tools to eliminate the discharge of pollutants into the nation's waters and achieve water quality that is both “swimmable and fishable”.

***Porter-Cologne Water Quality Control Act*** is the principal state law that governs water protection efforts in California. Enacted in 1969, sections of the state law served as the basis for the federal Clean Water Act of 1972. Porter-Cologne establishes the State Water Resources Control Board and each of the nine Regional Water Quality Control Boards as the principal state agencies for coordinating and controlling water quality in California. The Regional Boards issues CWA NPDES permits (see below) to selected point-source discharges and either waste discharge requirements or conditional water quality certifications for other discharges.

***National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) (Section 402 of CWA)*** – is the Clean Water Act's primary point source control program. This permit program controls water pollution by regulating point sources that discharge pollutants into the “waters of the United States.” The latter is defined to include rivers, lakes, streams, ponds, and wetlands that are, or could be, used in interstate commerce. In response to 1987 Amendments to the CWA, the EPA broadened the focus beyond point source discharges by developing a two-phased NPDES permit program to regulate contaminated storm water (non-point source) discharges.

***Nonpoint Source Program (Section 319 of CWA)*** – provides grants to states, tribes, and territories for the development and implementation of nonpoint source (NPS) management programs. NPS represents the most significant source of water pollution in the country. Section 319 funds can be used for the development and implementation of TMDLs in watersheds where nonpoint sources are a substantial contributor of loadings of the pollutant(s) causing impairment.

***Water Quality Standards (Section 303 of CWA)*** – requires that states establish ambient water quality standards for water bodies, consisting of the beneficial use or uses of a water body (e.g. recreation, public water supply, etc.), and the water quality criteria necessary to protect the use or uses. **Section 303(d)** requires states to identify waters that are impaired by pollution, even after application of pollution controls. For those waters states must establish TMDLs (as discussed above) to ensure that water quality standards can be achieved.

***Water Quality Standards Certification (Section 401 of CWA)*** – requires that before issuing a license or permit that may result in any discharge to waters of the United States, a federal agency must obtain from the state in which the proposed project is located a certification that the discharge is consistent with the CWA, including State Water Quality Standards. In California, the Regional Water Quality Control Boards, with oversight from the State Water Quality Control Board, are responsible for reviewing Section 401 applications. A Section 401 Water Quality Certification must be issued before the Corps will issue a final Section 404 permit.

***Section 404 of the CWA*** – regulates the discharge of dredged or fill materials into the waters of the United States, including wetlands. Such discharges are prohibited unless authorized by a permit from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

***Sections 1600 to 1616 of California Fish and Game Code*** – requires any person, state, or local government agency or public utility to notify the California Department of Fish and Game before beginning any activity that will substantially modify a river, stream, or lake. If it is determined that the activity could substantially adversely impact an existing fish and wildlife resource, a Lake or Streambed Alteration Agreement is required.

***Rivers and Harbors Act of 1899*** – prohibits the creation of any obstruction to the navigable capacity of any waters of the United States without specific approval of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Section 10 permits are required along with permits issued under Section 404 of the CWA when the affected wetlands are defined as navigable.

## 1.6 SUMMARY OF RIO HONDO WATERSHED PLANNING PROCESS

One of the defining characteristics of the Rio Hondo Watershed, and a critical aspect in its future “restoration” is the current overall lack of awareness about the watershed. Most members of the public have only recently begun to recognize the presence of the Los Angeles and San Gabriel Rivers, and are even less cognizant of smaller tributaries like the Rio Hondo. The challenge for the Rio Hondo is the need to develop a constituency around something that most people do not even know exists, or if they are aware of it have only a vague sense of its location, size, and character.

The development of this watershed plan presented the first opportunity to bring people together to focus on the Rio Hondo watershed as a distinct geographic entity that requires their recognition, understanding, and active support. For this reason, much of the planning process focused on building awareness among those key organizations and individuals in a position to affect the future direction of the watershed; creating the firm foundation for a constituency that can later implement plan recommendations and manage the watershed.

This watershed planning process operated on two parallel but interrelated tracks. The first track was facilitating a dialogue among key stakeholders within the watershed. This was needed to establish the watershed as a necessary focus of public attention, to share divergent perspectives, to create understanding among different organizations, and to chart a course for future change. The second track within the watershed planning process involved compiling existing data to pull together what could be learned about the watershed and to use that information to inform the more public aspect of the endeavor.

### Planning Process Participants

A Project Management Team (PMT) was created to ensure the effective and efficient implementation of the watershed management planning project. The PMT served as a key resource source for the planning process, providing policy guidance, access to relevant historical and GIS data, as well as providing essential technical support during key steps in the planning process. It consisted of key staff from the:

- San Gabriel Valley Council of Governments (SGVCOG);
- San Gabriel and Lower Los Angeles River and Mountains Conservancy (RMC);

- Los Angeles Regional Water Quality Control Board;
- County of Los Angeles Department of Public Works (LACDPW); and
- Moore, Iacofano, Goltsman, Inc. (MIG) consultant team, including Phillip Williams and Associates (PWA) and the Chambers Group, Inc.

A Policy Advisory Committee (PAC) consisting of representatives from key stakeholders in the Rio Hondo Watershed was established as the principal instrument for carrying out the watershed planning process. The PAC met periodically and provided a forum for divergent interests to share their perspectives, forge a common vision for the future of the watershed, and to identify the strategies and actions that will be required to make that vision a reality. In addition to the full meetings of the PAC, two subcommittees were formed; one to address water quality and the second to explore in more depth project opportunities identified during full meetings of the PAC.

Invitations to join the PAC were sent out to a cross-section of stakeholders throughout the watershed. The preliminary list of stakeholders included all 22 cities located within the watershed, water agencies, federal and state agencies, county and regional groups, non-profit groups, and elected officials at the federal and state level. (See Appendix for a list of all stakeholder organizations that received an invitation) Thirty-four organizations responded to the invitation to participate in the PAC and together they provided a representative cross-section of stakeholder interest in the Rio Hondo Watershed.



## RIO HONDO POLICY ADVISORY COMMITTEE PARTICIPANTS

### Local Governments

- City of Alhambra
- City of Arcadia
- City of Bell Gardens
- City of Duarte
- City of Downey
- City of Irwindale
- City of Monrovia
- City of Pasadena
- City of Pico Rivera
- City of Rosemead
- City of San Gabriel
- City of San Marino
- City of Sierra Madre
- City of South Gate
- City of South Pasadena

### County/Regional Groups

- Los Angeles County Sanitation District
- County of Los Angeles Department of Public Works
- County of Los Angeles Department of Parks and Recreation
- San Gabriel Valley Council of Governments

### State Agencies

- Regional Water Quality Control Board  
– Los Angeles
- San Gabriel and Lower Los Angeles Rivers and Mountains Conservancy (RMC)

### Federal Agencies

- US Army Corp of Engineers
- US Forest Service
- US National Park Service

### *Water Agencies*

- Upper San Gabriel Valley Municipal Water District
- Water Replenishment District of Southern California

### Private and Non-Profit Groups

- Amigos de los Rios
- Los Angeles and San Gabriel Rivers Watershed Council
- North East Trees
- San Gabriel Mountains Regional Conservancy
- Sierra Club

### Staff of Elected Officials

- Congresswoman Hilda Solis
- Senator Gloria Romero
- Senator Jack Scott

## Existing Conditions Assessment

Water quality emerged as the most significant issue to be tackled by the PAC during the early phases of the project. Representatives from many of the cities that participated in the PAC expressed concerns that compliance with current storm water permit requirements and other water quality improvement regulations would require very costly solutions that local city budgets could not handle. They envisioned the watershed plan as a way to make a strong case for more cost-effective watershed-wide solutions to be approved by the Regional Board as a reasonable way to achieve local water quality standards. These PAC members also needed assurance that water quality sampling undertaken as part of the watershed planning process would not inadvertently impose additional 303(d) listings in the watershed.

Since existing water quality data for the Rio Hondo was needed to assess future progress, a sampling event was carried out in August 2003. A water quality sampling methodology was reviewed and approved by the PAC to ensure its objectivity and reliability. This was considered an essential first step in developing a watershed plan trusted by all involved in the process. The sampling event was carried out by staff from LACDPW at nine different locations in the watershed. An overall analysis of water quality in the Rio Hondo Watershed was subsequently prepared which integrated information from the water quality sampling event with pre-existing historical data (*see Appendix for the Water Quality Sampling Methodology.*)

Following the sampling event, the focus of the watershed planning process broadened to encompass other issues and topics. Preliminary observations of existing conditions in the watershed were made using currently available data and visits to a few selected sites of interest in the watershed. Maps were generated from a GIS database which examined the watershed from multiple perspectives, including flood control, water supply, water quality, recreation, open space, habitat, and land use. In conjunction with information provided by the site visits and input from stakeholders, these maps provide a broad initial view of existing conditions as well as potential opportunities for improvement in the watershed. However, in the future a more thorough assessment of the Rio Hondo watershed, including GIS analysis and modeling, on the ground mapping, biological mapping and assessment, and hydrologic/geomorphologic assessment, will need to be carried out in the next phase of the watershed planning process.

## Initial Proposed Solutions

Concurrent with the existing conditions assessment, the consultant team conducted a series of six focus groups in the late summer 2003. The purpose of the focus groups was to hear from a wide range of stakeholder perspectives on strategic issues

impacting the watershed. Each focus group was set up for a specific set of stakeholders, i.e. affinity groups. Despite the different composition of the focus groups, certain ideas and themes kept recurring suggesting the potential for an emerging consensus around which the watershed plan could be developed (*See Focus Group Summary in the Appendix*) Most significantly, each focus group suggested the same three sites – Peck Road Water Conservation Park, Whittier Narrows Area, and the Rio Hondo Spreading Grounds - as ideal locations for the development of a variety of multi-objective projects that would benefit the overall watershed. These strategic locations reflected the shared desire for a collaborative, watershed-wide approach that encompassed both inter-jurisdictional and local, sub-watershed projects working together to achieve the overall goals of the watershed plan.

The multi-project potential of these three sites was further explored in subsequent meetings of the PAC, as well as its “Solutions Subcommittee.” As discussions continued, the initial consensus around these three sites became more complex. Some members of the PAC believed these three sites should be core elements in the final plan, as storm water could be treated at these locations in a regional, consolidated manner. They believed this would be the most cost-effective approach, but it would require a degree of regulatory flexibility from the Regional Board.

Other members of the PAC observed that an exclusive focus on these three project areas, by failing to develop significant opportunities for improvement elsewhere in the watershed, would prove insufficient to achieve the goal of a healthy watershed. While agreeing that there was an opportunity to do multi-benefit projects in these locations, the second group believed a watershed plan that focused primarily at key sites near confluences and where there is ample open space would be fundamentally flawed. Regional solutions implemented at these three sites would allow all of the streams and waterways above these locations to remain impaired. Any restoration activities planned in the upper watershed would continue to be subject to degradation and poor watershed health, conflicting with the holistic vision of a healthy watershed. Smaller projects scattered at local sub-sub-watershed sites throughout the watershed and in every city would be far more feasible and would more closely mimic the natural functions of a fully functioning, healthy watershed.

To resolve these differences, it was suggested that a detailed menu of solutions be developed that could address the needs of the overall watershed.

## Public Participation

A high level of stakeholder participation in the watershed planning process emerged through both the meetings of the PAC and its two subcommittees – Water Quality, and Solutions. This represents a significant milestone in the development of a

constituency working on behalf of the Rio Hondo Watershed, as these and other stakeholders are the ones who will ultimately share responsibility for raising public awareness.

In November 2003, in an effort to build further awareness about the Rio Hondo Watershed and development of the watershed plan, a public forum was held at the Garvey Community Center in the City of Rosemead. The purpose of the public forum was to generate public feedback on initial findings and plan recommendations, which would be used to further develop the draft watershed plan. Although well-publicized, low attendance at the forum re-emphasized the general lack of public awareness about the Rio Hondo Watershed and its importance.

Raising public awareness about the watershed through outreach programs and volunteer activities will be a key task coming out of the watershed plan. The stakeholders on the PAC who participated in the watershed planning process represent the core of a new constituency that can work on behalf of the watershed. That constituency barely existed before this planning process began. Through further watershed planning and implementation, there is an opportunity to expand beyond this core constituency to include more of the general public.

## Next Steps

The most significant and also essential outcome of the Rio Hondo watershed planning process was successfully establishing a level of trust among the cities and other stakeholders who participated in both the PAC and subcommittee meetings. This primarily came about through efforts of the PAC to devise a water quality sampling methodology that would satisfy the needs and concern of all the stakeholders, and also by directly addressing the overall water quality issue. The presence of a representative from the Regional Board during these sessions, clarifying issues raised by the PAC, helped to foster a more open dialogue. This further demonstrated the essential need for consistent communication between all involved interests, a willingness to be flexible, and transparency in all transactions.

This initial success allowed the stakeholder group to then focus on the watershed as a whole, placing them in a better position to recognize other potential opportunities to collaborate on behalf of the entire watershed. Hence, the shared excitement and interest in developing multi-objective projects throughout the watershed and at the three locations independently identified by so many of the stakeholders as being of strategic importance to the watershed.

Much more work remains to sustain and strengthen this trust among the stakeholders of the Rio Hondo watershed. In the short-term, a way must be found that will allow the PAC to continue to meet on a regular, on-going basis for the purpose of

developing and refining the project proposals and recommendations contained in this initial watershed plan. This continued dialogue among cities and other constituents of the watershed can lay the necessary foundation for a more formal institutional framework that is willing to take the lead in pushing for progress by implementing this plan.



*Confluence of the Rio Hondo and the Los Angeles River.*



## 1.7 RELATIONSHIP TO OTHER RIVER AND WATERSHED PLANNING STUDIES

Efforts to restore the Rio Hondo Watershed should be undertaken as part of a broader coordinated effort involving other watershed and sub-watershed management plans, as well as river corridor master plans for the Los Angeles and San Gabriel Rivers. For this reason, the Rio Hondo Watershed Management Plan incorporates the Guiding Principles of *Common Ground from the Mountains to the Sea, the Watershed and Open Space Plan for the San Gabriel and Los Angeles Rivers*, developed by the San Gabriel and Lower Los Angeles Rivers and Mountains Conservancy (RMC), with the support of the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy (SMMC). *Common Ground* is intended to provide guiding principles for planning efforts, offer support, and inform planning efforts by other public agencies, cities, and community groups. This includes ongoing and pending sub-watershed plans, such as this one developed for the Rio Hondo. (See *Insert – Common Ground Guiding Principles*)

## Common Ground Guiding Principles

- **Land: Grow a Greener Southern California**
  - Create, Expand, and Improve Public Open Space Throughout the Region
  - Improve Access to Open Space and Recreation for All Communities
  - Improve Habitat Quality, Quantity, and Connectivity
  - Connect Open Space with a Network of Trails
  - Promote Stewardship of the Landscape
  - Encourage Sustainable Growth to Balance Environmental, Social, and Economic Benefits
- **Water: Enhance Waters and Waterways**
  - Maintain and Improve Flood Protection
  - Establish Riverfront Greenways to Cleanse Water, Hold Floodwaters and Extend Open Space
  - Improve Quality of Surface Water and Groundwater
  - Improve Flood Safety Through Restoration of River and Creek Ecosystems
  - Optimize Water Resources to Reduce Dependence on Imported Water
- **Planning: Plan Together and Make it Happen**
  - Coordinate Watershed Planning Across Jurisdictions and Boundaries
  - Encourage Multi-Objective Planning and Projects
  - Use Science as a Basis for Planning
  - Involve the Public Through Education and Outreach Programs
  - Utilize the Plan in an On-Going Management Process

Given the strategic location of the Rio Hondo as a link between the Los Angeles and San Gabriel Rivers, the Watershed Management Plan developed for the Rio Hondo must draw upon and support those larger related efforts. By establishing clear goals and priorities, the Rio Hondo Watershed Plan will provide stakeholders the means to coordinate their efforts with stakeholders working in other sub-watersheds and along the main river corridors and tributaries of the Los Angeles and San Gabriel Rivers.

For instance, although there are differences between river corridor plans and watershed plans, they should be designed to work together to achieve their shared and linked goals. River plans are more focused on the relatively narrow corridor of land through which the river flows. Such plans will strive to form working partnerships among all the cities and other public agencies that lie along the river. In contrast, a watershed plan will encompass all the jurisdictions that lie within a watershed, and not just those located along the riverbanks. As a watershed includes all the land area that drains into a river, benefits stemming from the implementation of a watershed plan



will positively impact efforts to improve the river that forms the main stem of a watershed. In the case of the Rio Hondo Watershed, however, there is no distinct plan for the corridor of the Rio Hondo. Instead, efforts focused on the Rio Hondo corridor are most likely to be an integral subset of the Rio Hondo Watershed Management Plan. However, since the Rio Hondo is a tributary of the Los Angeles River, benefits stemming from the Rio Hondo Watershed are likely to benefit the planning efforts of the Los Angeles River Master Plan (see below).

In addition to *Common Ground*, the following is a summary of other recent and ongoing planning studies that can serve as a resource for the Rio Hondo Watershed Management Program.

### **Los Angeles River Master Plan**

*County of Los Angeles Department of Public Works, June 1996*

The Los Angeles River Master Plan identifies issues specific to the corridors of the Los Angeles River and Tujunga Wash, articulates a vision for the future of the river corridors, and makes specific recommendations on how to make that vision a reality.

### **San Gabriel River Corridor Master Plan**

*LA County Department of Public Works, Projected Adoption - July 2004*

The Master Plan is a multi-objective plan for the San Gabriel River, integrating goals of habitat, recreation, and open space while also maintaining and enhancing flood protection, water supply, and water quality.

### **Puente Hills Corridor: Greenspace Connectivity for Wildlife and People**

*California State Polytechnic University Pomona, June 1997*

This study explored the issues facing the development of a habitat corridor within the context of a regional greenspace system

### **Reconnecting the San Gabriel Valley: A Planning Approach for the Creation of Interconnected Urban Wildlife Corridor Networks**

*California State Polytechnic University Pomona, June 2000*

This study, prepared for the San Gabriel Mountains Regional Conservancy, presents recommendations for creating habitat networks within the San Gabriel Valley to support wildlife connectivity

## **Los Angeles and San Gabriel Rivers Watershed Feasibility Study**

*US Army Corps of Engineers, July 2001*

The Army Corp of Engineers and LADCPW undertook this study as a partnership “to gather and evaluate available information, to look for improvements for watershed improvement, and to initiate thinking on a future integrated Watershed Management Plan.”

## **San Gabriel Confluence Park: A River Based Urban Nature Network**

*California State Polytechnic University Pomona, June 2000*

This planning study was prepared for the Sierra Club, and examines the potential for an 8-mile long open space corridor along both the Rio Hondo and San Gabriel Rivers above the Whittier Narrows.

## **Forest Master Plan Update**

*USDA Forest Service-Angeles National Forest, Expected Completion - 2004*

The US Forest Service is updating its Forest Plans for Southern California, including the Angeles National Forest. The Forest Plans set policies for the types of activities and special designations that can occur within each forest. The headwaters of the Rio Hondo are within the Angeles National Forest.

## **San Gabriel River Watershed Special Resource Study**

*US Department of the Interior, Expected Completion - 2007*

Legislation enacted in July 2003 directed the Secretary of the Interior to conduct a special resource study of the San Gabriel River and sections of the San Gabriel Mountains, to consider whether any portion of the area should be added to the national park system

## **Rivers/Tributaries Parkway Plan**

*San Gabriel and Lower Los Angeles Rivers and Mountains Conservancy*

Building from the *Common Ground* planning report, RMC is developing a rivers and tributaries parkway plan. This effort will largely draw upon the relevant portions of the San Gabriel River Master Plan to avoid duplicative efforts and expense.

## **Watershed Management Plan for the San Gabriel River Above Whittier Narrows**

*San Gabriel Mountains Regional Conservancy*

This planning effort focuses on the upper half of the San Gabriel River Watershed, including three important sub-watersheds: Upper San Gabriel River, Walnut Creek, and San Jose Creek.

## **San Gabriel River Watershed Non-Point Source Pollution Reduction Program**

*Upper San Gabriel Municipal Water District*

This program will address non-point source pollution issues such as trash, nutrients and coliform. It will focus on two locations in the Angeles National Forest - San Gabriel Canyon and Chantry Flats

## **Water Quality Control Plan: Los Angeles Region Basin Plan for the Coastal Watersheds of Los Angeles and Ventura Counties**

*Los Angeles Regional Water Quality Control Board*

This plan is designed to preserve and enhance water quality and protect the beneficial uses of all regional waters. The Basin Plan designates beneficial uses for surface and groundwaters, sets narrative and numerical objectives, and describes implementation programs to protect all waters in the Region.

## **Watershed Management Initiative (WMI) Chapter – December 2001**

*Los Angeles Regional Water Quality Control Board*

The WMI is designed to integrate various surface and ground water regulatory programs while promoting cooperative, collaborative efforts within a watershed. It is also designed to focus limited resources on key issues and use sound science.

## **Southern California Wetlands Recovery Project**

*California Coastal Conservancy*

A partnership of public agencies working cooperatively to acquire, restore and enhance coastal wetlands between Point Conception and the border with Mexico. The goal is to develop and implement a regional prioritization plan that will accelerate acquisition and restoration.

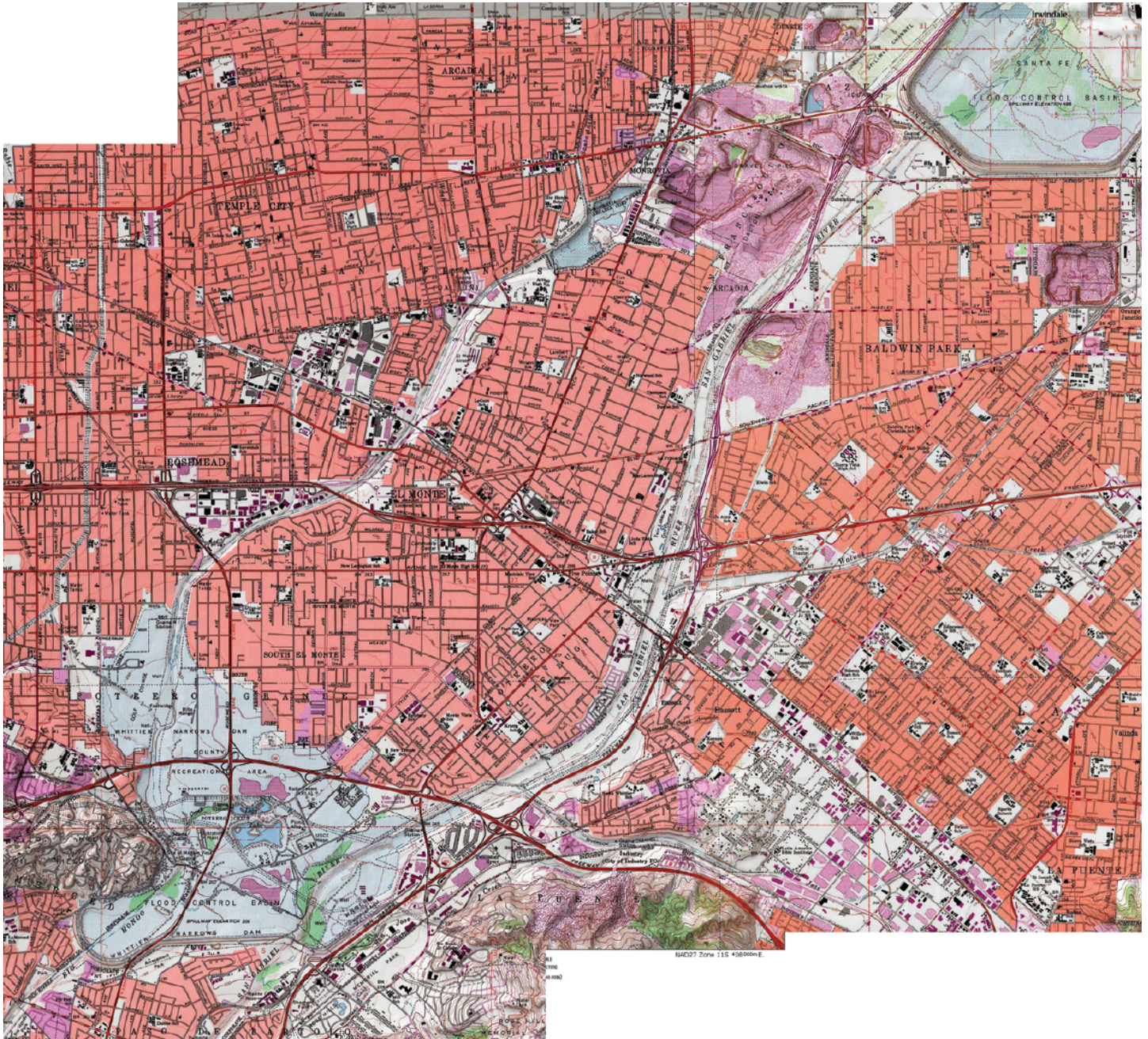
## **Sediment Management Plan**

*County of Los Angeles Department of Public Works and California State Polytechnic University Pomona*

Sedimentation deposits at the three dams in the upper San Gabriel River have drastically reduced the capacity of these reservoirs. This study will evaluate the potential adverse effects resulting from the current sluicing method for removing sediments and assess the feasibility of alternate sediment management plans.



# USGS Map of Rio Hondo & San Gabriel Rivers upstream of Whittier Narrows



Map of Rio Hondo to South of Whittier Narrows  
(Courtesy of Rivers and Mountains Conservancy)

## 1.8 PLAN ORGANIZATION

The Rio Hondo Watershed Management Plan is organized into five chapters and Appendices:

### Chapter I: Introduction

The introduction preceding this page provides background information, explains the purpose of the Plan, discusses reason for organizing around watersheds, and provides an introductory profile of the Rio Hondo Watershed. It discusses the water quality regulatory environment and how it has recently encouraged the development of watershed management plans. A summary of the planning process is also presented. This chapter concludes by discussing the relationship between the Rio Hondo Watershed Management Plan and other nearby river and watershed planning studies.

### Chapter II: Existing Watershed Conditions

This chapter discusses the current context within which the Watershed Management Plan will be implemented. This includes a review of the existing conditions within the broad topic areas of water, land, social context, and political context.

### Chapter III: Watershed Management Plan Framework

This chapter presents the overall vision for the Rio Hondo Watershed that emerged from the planning process, the goals that will support that Vision, and the key strategies identified by the PAC for achieving them.

### Chapter IV: Implementation Strategy / Action Plan

The Implementation Strategy addresses the need for an ongoing watershed consortium to oversee studies, funding, and watershed awareness in the community. Three priority projects at Peck Water Conservation Park, Whittier Narrows, and Rio Hondo Spreading Grounds are emphasized. A detailed list of preliminary projects that are supported by the PAC, is presented to carry out strategies presented in Chapter III. Additional opportunities for improvement are also identified.

## **Chapter V: Bibliography and Glossary**

References and commonly used watershed terms are presented in this chapter.

## **Appendices**

The appendices provide technical background information on water quality, summaries of all Rio Hondo Watershed planning meetings and focus groups.